

“Authority & Adoption: Being a Child of God” based Ephesians 1:3-14 and John 1:1-18
Delivered on January 3, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

There is just so much in these texts today, that as I sought to write this sermon, I found myself struggling to find that one cohesive lead in, that little story, that might explain them.

So, I considered telling you the story of Nestor the Long-Eared Donkey, a movie we watched with the kids. It's a Christmas tale of an unusual beast of burden with great long ears, who gets made fun of because of those ears, like many a Rankin-Bass holiday character, such as Rudolf. He is outcast, literally thrown out into the cold to die, and yet he is saved by the sacrificial love of his mother, who protects him and dies for him. This preserves his life, ensuring he would find his true purpose in life, to carry a pregnant woman named Mary and lead her husband Joseph, through a sandstorm, from Nazareth to the city of Bethlehem.

I considered using the story of the actor and singer Kristen Chenoweth, who was adopted at five days old by a couple of engineers who couldn't sing. They were confused when they saw this 7-year-old in her bed singing herself to sleep with the Wizard of Oz, which is fitting since she came to fame playing Glinda the good witch in Broadway's prequel, 'Wicked.' They heard her singing and since neither of them could sing, they did what they could to give her every opportunity, beginning with church and by age 12 she was singing at the national conference of the Southern Baptist Convention. Year's later, after Broadway, movies and TV, Chenoweth met her birthmother, Lynn, who asked her daughter if she could forgive her for giving her up. Chenoweth instead thanked her, saying, "Forgive you? You gave me life," Chenoweth said to her birthmother, "and then my parents, Junie and Jerry, they gave me a life, a chance at a life."

And then that made me think of her adoption as a gift and all of Paul's talk of inheritance, and I thought that in this Christmas season it might make sense to talk about gifts, considering that even in this difficult year and economic downturn, statistics show the average American seems to have only spent about 5 percent less, spending nearly \$1,000 each, with two thirds of that going toward gifts, and the rest spent on food, decorations, and personal items, like those gifts you buy this time of year for yourself.

This made me think about how we give gifts, how we decide who we give a gift to each year, who is on our list that we check twice and try to figure out who deserves a gift. I considered how sometimes, as we get older, it gets harder for us to receive gifts, because we think, 'O I don't deserve this,' or 'I really don't need this,' and it is hard to accept a gift with no strings attached.

Each of these examples touches on the truth that is contained in these texts, but none encapsulate it fully. These texts are all centered on the gift, or grace, that God gives us, a gift we do not earn or deserve. But by this gift of grace, we were destined to be adopted into the family of God, empowered by our belief in Jesus, that is seen in our welcoming or receiving him. For

even if we, like Jesus, are rejected by this world, we are still called and given authority to be God's children, not by pride of our birth, our blood rights, or by what we have done or accomplished in our flesh, and not by our own human will, but because we are born new in Christ, born again, yes, chosen by God.

These texts contain the central truth to the Christian faith and to our Christmas celebration: Who we are, as Children of God, is determined by who Jesus is, as the Son of God. It is important to remember the miracle of Christmas is not that a child was born, but that God was born a child, fully divine, and yet fully a human being too – 100% each – so that we as mere human beings might be adopted by God, through the life, death and resurrection of God's only Son.

In Advent, we read this same text from John and I focused on Jesus as the tabernacle, as the meeting place of heaven and earth, a moveable temple like in the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land. This is a preview of the new creation where God will dwell in this way among us. Still, now, in this time, after Jesus began the new creation by rising, yet before the completion of the new heaven and the new earth, God's Holy Spirit rests within us, in those who believe, so that we become like little temples where God dwells.

As Christians, the concept of the temple is inverted. Ancient pagan temples were a building that housed inside of it an image of a God. The Israelite temple never had an image of a God, they had nothing. Why? Because every person, every single human being, a believer or not, from this country or any country in the world, is made in the image of God. God does not need a statue because we were made to bear God's image. And all are called to receive then the presence of God's Holy Spirit, by believing in the Son, that is to say, turning away from our sin and toward the God pursuing us, so that the lavish gifts of grace and forgiveness can wash over us, like the waters of baptism, and transform us by the love of God to fulfill our destiny in Christ.

Friends, the mysteries of God are not easy to understand, but we must try to do so. Each and every one of us, young and old, male and female, of every nation and status, rich or poor, are called equally, yes equally, to know the love of God in our everyday lives and live by that love. For some reason, the One True God, who has no need for humanity, has created and called humanity, and each of you as individuals, to be in communion with God our Father, by being in community with one other, namely in the church, which Jesus established, and in which the Holy Spirit dwells.

This language of adoption is important for us to understand because it has been used wrongly in the past. It can get confusing. We are the adopted children of God, but Jesus is the Son of God. Sometimes, this gets mixed up and there are those who might look at Jesus and think that God saw and adopted this perfect man to be the means by which every human being is called and saved for eternal life. But the love of God is not that God saw some human reach perfection and blessed him. No, God saw us in our failures and our weaknesses, in our inability to be perfect

like God is perfect, and came down to us, to live in our weakness. Indeed, as a human Jesus submitting fully to the Holy Spirit within Him, only to die at the hands of worldly powers, and rise again to defeat sin and death, all that this world had to offer and begin for us a new life, a new creation.

After years like 2020, we think, 'what is going on?' But my friends, behold, God is a god who makes things new. That is how it has been from the beginning. God is making you new each and every day by mercy.

As John points out, Jesus is not a mere human whom God adopted, but he is begotten of God. It's a weird term, but it means drawn from, not birthed, but fully one with the one from whom he was withdrawn. Indeed, Jesus is the 'Begotten God,' the Word – meaning the identity or rationale – of the One True God sent to us. And this is where it gets super complicated to understand, but it is key here. Jesus is both fully one in being with God the Father and yet also human, and yet He is distinct from the Father, eternally and co-equal to God the Father: A unique person within the One True God, the Lord of Israel.

This shows us that God is humble, humble enough to share fully in our humanity, so that we might see what it is to be fully human and live in a way that reflects how God intends us to live, knowing that sin and death have been defeated, and that Jesus had done what we could not, dying on the cross and paying our penalty for sin.

This means that it is us, we as just mere humans, who because of who Jesus is and all that Jesus did, now get to share in God's life, first abundantly. This word means completely. It is not about an abundance of the things we have or what we pray for and receive. It's certainly not about the material things, but instead it is for us to be housing for God's Holy Spirit. This is in a limited measure, but in full measure, so that we might individually and collectively be like temples for God, bringing the revelation of the one True God everywhere we go.

Yes, you are marked with the seal of this Spirit and God's promises for you, by the working of the Holy Spirit within us, pouring God's love in your hearts, to change you and individuals, to change you as a church community and to change this world. That's our calling – yours and mine – and no more mine because I'm a pastor and no less yours because of anything you are in your life. We are all sinners, made righteous by the Lord, to make this world reflect God's glory. How? By loving one another. Loving God. Serving one another. Trusting that we are in fact so beloved by our God that we would be held forever.

Second, as adopted children of God, we share in an inheritance we don't deserve, this promise of eternal life, first in the presence of God in heaven after we die, and later to quote N.T. Wright, in 'life after life after death,' in the presence of God in a new combined heaven and earth, where we will be restored to an embodied life to live with our God. We are by this adoption, by our receiving of Jesus as the Lord, given authority, empowered as children of God to love as Jesus

loves us, through service to God and to one another, just as Jesus washed the feet of His disciples, and gave his life, his very being, for the benefit of his friends.

Jesus said there is no greater love than to lay down our life. This is not just dying in a physical sense, but the word used for life here is bigger than that. If it were just physical life it would be *bios* in Greek, but here it is *psyche*, meaning life, soul, identity, our whole identity. It is all of who we are. That is what we lay down and then we get to pick it up again with him and be who we were made to be. That's the beauty of this whole adoption and children of God concept. It's that God shared in our humanity, sending his son to be human like us, sending the Word to take on our flesh, so that we who are mere flesh, would be able to know God's life abundant and eternal.

This is the love of God and in this new year it is our hope. What's more, my hope for you is that your resolutions this year will not just be material things and personal goals, which are both good and valid, like my need to lose weight. Still, my hope is that we all begin our resolutions by remembering the love God has for us.

I want you to remember the incarnation of God coming down to us, not expecting us to be perfect to come up to God. I want you to remember the epiphany, of Jesus being revealed to be God, who in his humanity would go to the cross to die for us and rise for us. I want you to remember that the new creation has begun and recognize the Pentecost moment of God's Spirit coming down to you and to all of us, so that it might re-order our lives. That's what we see when we go through the church calendar every year.

It's important to go through it because it is important to understand the presence of God in our lives. That's the simple way to put this all together. I want you to recognize the presence of God in your life and the love of God being poured out in your heart. This way, even if you are an outcast like Nestor, who was made fun of for those long ears, you may not know why you have them at first, but you will find God's purpose for you, as he had.

I want you to recognize God with you so that if you have a special talent or you see a special talent in someone else, you can bring that talent out for God's glory, and recognize that by adoption we are chosen, just as Kristen Chenoweth speaks of being chosen by her adoptive parents, with birth parents that gave her life, but that it was adoption that gave her 'a life.' You have 'a life' in Christ.

And then remember that this gift is our inheritance and it's not one we deserve, and so it may feel awkward to accept something we do not deserve, but it's there for you. God is pursuing you with love, a covenantal love, defined by mercy and kindness.

I'm calling on you in this new year to heed these scriptures we read today and hear what they have to say. Be aware of God's presence in your life, so that by living like a child of God you will reveal God's glory to others. Amen.